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EC72-1228 Gourds...Their Culture Preparation and Use

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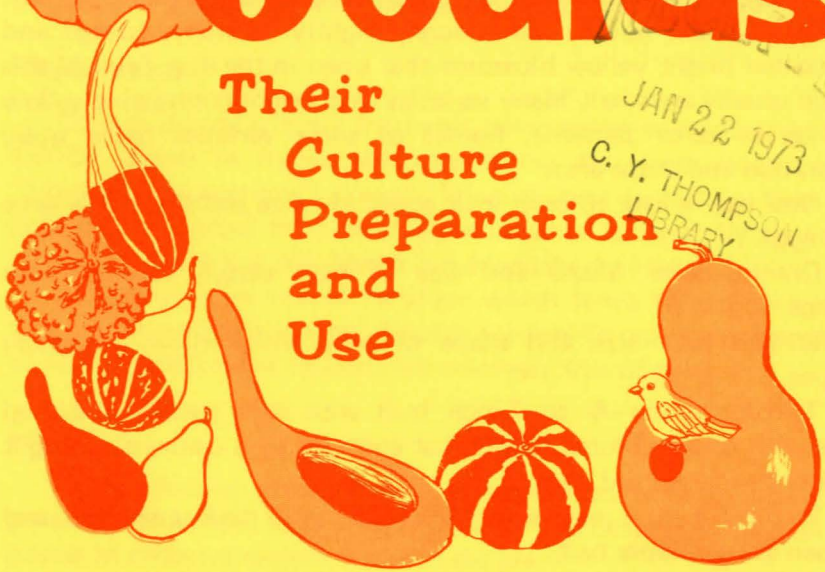

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Archeological records show gourds have been used by man for over 4,000 years. They were among the many interesting things found in early Egyptian tombs. Their great diversity of shape, color and usefulness continues to interest us today.

Gourds are quick growing vining plants that can rapidly climb over a fence or trellis to provide shade or screen an unsightly view. Vines are covered with an abundance of blooms that develop into fascinating fruit in the fall.

Gourds make attractive ornaments, novel utensils and containers and weatherproof nest houses for birds.

Extension Service
University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Agriculture Cooperating with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the College of Home Economics
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Varieties

Three groups of plants all commonly called "gourds" grow well in Nebraska.

1. *Ovifera* gourds: One group, closely related to pumpkin and squash is believed to have been domesticated by Indians in our southwest. The scientific name of this group is *Cucurbita pepo* var. *ovifera. Ovifera* gourds have rough, slightly scratchy, foliage and unscented bright yellow blossoms that open in the day. Fruit of this group usually are small. Many varieties have bright contrasting yellow and green color patterns. Names of some varieties based upon coloration and shape are:

Nest egg—cream colored fruit about the size and shape of a large hen egg.

Orange—color, shape and size of fruit closely resembles an orange.

Striped pear—size and shape of pear with yellow and green stripes.

Tricolor spoon—6- to 7-inch fruit with dark green ball-shaped base with cream colored stripes that continue up a contrasting bright yellow slender curved neck.

Bicolor—4- to 6-inch pear-shaped fruit with dark green base and golden yellow upper half.

Holy crown—cream colored oblate fruit surrounded by ring of interesting finger-like protrusions.

Warted—warted fruit of mixed colors and shapes.

2. *Langenaria*: This group, considered to be originally from Africa, has plants with soft velvety foliage bearing white, scented blossoms that open at night. *Langenaria* produces large, pale green fruit that change to a buff color after curing. Primitive societies have and continue to rely on these thin hard-shelled gourds as a source of utensils and containers as well as ornaments. Varietal selections from this group based upon shape or historic use are:

Bottle or calabash—6- to 8-inch diameter bottle-shaped fruit with constricted neck. Ideal for making nesting houses for birds.

Caveman's club—smooth 3-foot fruit shaped like a baseball bat.

Dipper—16- to 18-inch fruit with large oval base and large slender neck.

Powder horn or penguin—large fruit with short gracefully curved neck.

3. *Luffa cylindria:* This interesting gourd, commonly called Luffa sponge or dishrag gourd, is native to the tropics. It bears 1- to 2-foot cylindrical fruit with useful fibrous flesh. After proper preparation these fibers may be used in scrubbing and cleaning.

Requirements

Gourds do not tolerate frost and, being native to tropical regions, can be grown in higher latitudes during the warm season when "tropical temperatures" prevail. They do best in full sunlight and benefit if protected from wind. Gourds can be successfully grown on any good garden soil provided it has adequate drainage.

Avoid excessive use of fertilizer which tends to promote extra vine growth and poorer fruit. Gourds are easy to grow and, compared to many vegetables or flowers, are relatively free of pests.

Culture

Delay planting gourds until the temperature is warm enough to germinate seeds and sustain early growth. The best times for planting gourds in different regions of Nebraska are:

Eastern Nebraska—May 10 to June 15
Central Nebraska—May 15 to May 30
Panhandle—May 20 to May 25

Seed planted later than the above dates, particularly *Langenaria* gourds, may not have sufficient time to mature fruit.

Plant four to six seeds about 1 inch deep in hills spaced six to eight feet apart in well-prepared soil. When plants are well established, thin to two vigorous plants per hill by cutting off rather than pulling out excess plants so as not to disturb roots on the remaining two plants.

Spray or dust material containing Sevin, Malathion, Diazinon, Methoxychlor, Pyrethrum or Rotenone as soon as the plants emerge and at 7- to 10-day intervals until vigorous vining begins.

Gourds do well on the ground but produce fruit with more uniform color and shape and with fewer blemishes when trained on a fence or trellis. Cultivate shallow and only to control weeds. If leaves begin to droop in the heat of the day a thorough deep soaking is

better than frequent shallow watering. Avoid sprinkling or spraying water on foliage which may promote mildew disease.

Harvesting and Curing

Gourds do not cure well unless fully matured. At maturity, *Ovifera* gourds should be completely colored and hard when pressed with the thumb nail. Maturing *Langenaria* fruit benefit from cool temperature and may be left on the vine until light frost. Fruit are pale green and the stem light brown when mature. Cut fruit from the vine leaving two to three inches of stem attached and handle carefully to prevent bruising or scars.

Washing fruit with a mild borax solution and drying with a cloth discourages diseases that may spot the skin. Cure fruit by hanging it or placing it on a screen or table in a warm, well ventilated place. Hang by the stem rather than pierce the fruit. If lying on a surface, occasionally turn curing fruit to assure uniform coloration. Properly cured *Ovifera* gourds will keep three to four months. The harder-shelled *Langenaria* gourds will keep several years.

Preparation

The beauty of *Ovifera* gourds is enhanced when polished with a clear high quality furniture wax. *Langenaria* gourds will take a very high wood-like polish after the surface is scrubbed with fine steel wool and dried with a soft cloth. Cured *Langenaria* gourds will develop a marble-like appearance if slowly turned over low heat. Designs can be lightly cut on these fruit or burned on with an electric needle before polishing. As with fine furniture the beauty of these gourds is maintained by occasional polishing with high grade colored enamels.

To make a nesting house for birds, the opening may be carefully cut with a sharp expansion bit or with small fine-toothed saw. Wrens prefer a 1 inch opening and purple martins 2½ inches. Rough edges of the opening should be smoothed by sanding. Hang nest houses with a copper wire strung through a small hole that has been drilled or burned through the neck of the gourd rather than by the stem.

Prepare Luffa sponge fibers by soaking the fruit in water several days until the skin and pith is softened and easily removed with the seed when gently scrubbed. Wash thoroughly in clear water and dry. Edges of the prepared fibers are bound by sewing on a cloth tape.